



COG REPORT

Las Virgenes / Malibu Council of Governments Fall 2002

L.A. County disaster ready

An \$11,000 federal emergency preparedness grant will go a long way toward beefing up disaster readiness for Los Angeles County through its support for a vital fire prevention community volunteer effort serving an area of the Santa Monica Mountains from Topanga to the Ventura County line.

The program, known as the Malibu / Lost Hills Sheriff's Station's Community

Arson Watch Volunteer Program, includes a patrol force consisting of some 150 volunteers and has been officially active since 1982.

The funds are being used to purchase and equip an Arson Watch command and control vehicle, a 2001 Ford three-quarter ton van, the first vehicle the Arson Watch non-profit corporation has owned in 19 years, according to Allen Emerson,

Civilian Coordinator of Arson Watch and a resident of Topanga for the past 26 years.

"The volunteers making up this program are motivated, they are concerned about their community, they are concerned about protecting not only the community, but they are going out there to protect their families and their pets," Emerson said. "The community as a whole appreciates what these volunteers do."

Susan Nissman, Senior Field Deputy for Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky who represents the area, agreed.

"The Arson Watch program, which has been in effect for nearly 20 years, is a critical and invaluable first line defense for residents throughout this entire region," Nissman said. "We count on them as the eyes and ears of the region to alert all of us to fires anywhere in the Santa Monica Mountain communities which are inhabited by literally tens of thousands of residents."

She added that this program regularly provides a complementary line of defense to the Los Angeles County Fire Department, generally the lead agency in incidents command, as well as to fire fighters from the U.S. Forest Service which regularly provides back-up support when fires strike the mountain region.

The grant, funded through Project Impact: Building Disaster Resistant Communities, is a program of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency. It was made possible by the Las Virgenes/Malibu Council of Governments (COG), of which the County of Los Angeles is a member.

"We were very pleased that the COG was able to pull together this funding package that will clearly provide a tremendous service to our residents by allowing us to prepare in advance for dis-

Las Virgenes / Malibu Council of Governments brings disaster preparedness funds to members

Members of the Las Virgenes / Malibu Council of Governments (COG) have received a combined \$100,000 in federally funded regional disaster preparedness grants in a U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) program known as "Project Impact: Building Disaster Resistant Communities."

"We applied for and received this funding through FEMA before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, but because of these tragic events these measures have become more meaningful than ever before," said COG Board President Louise Rishoff, who also serves as an Agoura Hills City Councilmember.

The funding – based on individual grant application proposals from the five member cities and the County of Los Angeles – is being divided equally among the members and will cover the costs of a wide variety of emergency preparedness programs ranging from the purchase of emergency supplies to upgrading communications equipment to training programs for disaster response team volunteers.

"Our local cities must have meaningful disaster preparedness plans in place and through this funding the cities in our immediate area are going to work on upgrading their plans right away," Rishoff said. "Most already have had their plans in place for basic disaster preparedness for some time. Under this funding, many submitted requests for supplemental programs for their portions of the federal grant monies available."

The Las Virgenes / Malibu Council of Governments is an agency voluntarily established by its members under a Joint Powers Agreement to provide a vehicle for members to engage in regional and cooperative planning and coordination of government services and responsibilities.

The COG also provides a regional organization for the review of federal, state and regional projects and studies which involve the use of federal, state and regional funds.

Members include the cities of Agoura Hills, Calabasas, Hidden Hills, Malibu and Westlake Village and the County of Los Angeles.

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Disaster Ready

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aster,” said Supervisor Yaroslavsky, the County’s representative on the COG Governing Board. “Naturally we all hope disaster will never strike, but it is vitally important that we all be ready just in case so we can do everything possible to keep injuries and even loss of life and property to an absolute minimum.”

Emerson explained that the Arson Watch volunteer teams, including 54 members who serve with him in the 12-mile-long Topanga area – from Pacific Coast Highway to Mulholland Drive – patrol the 185-square-mile Santa Monica Mountains region – from the Pacific Ocean to the Ventura Freeway – on a regular basis, particularly during high fire-danger days.

Patrols communicate via radio to their base stations and inform them of fire starts, suspicious activities, potential fire hazards like trash burning or camp fires, and maintain logs of vehicles observed in remote areas.

“This continuous communication is essential within such a large geographic area where one small fire can quickly become a major wildfire threatening thousands of homes in our communities,” Emerson said.

“The command and control vehicle can be likened to the ‘mother ship,’ coordinating all six Arson Watch teams and providing information to the Malibu/Lost Hills Sheriff’s Station Emergency Operations Center, as well as Emergency Operations Centers in Malibu and Topanga, while in the field during a wild fire incident,” he added.

The federal funding – along with donations to date of more than \$15,000 – was used toward the command and control vehicle project. The vehicle replaced a privately owned 15-year-old vehicle which was in need of upgrading.

The new vehicle contains three radios and a scanner, three different work stations for radio operators and fluorescent lighting, along with emergency equipment such as traffic cones, stop signs, fire extinguishers, a first aid kit, shovels and more.

Part of the funding is going toward spotlights, a public address system, an emergency power generator, outside work

lights and other equipment for the van.

All other vehicles used in the program are privately owned by Arson Watch members themselves.

Arson Watch operates on a budget of nearly \$14,000 annually to cover expenses such as radio “repeater” station rentals, cell phones, office expenses and related costs, Emerson said.

On a “red flag” warning or high fire danger day (days with humidity below 15 percent, high temperatures and windy conditions), on-going radio traffic typically includes a network of anywhere from 20 to 30 radios supplying information to Arson Watch Control Base Station.

All new members participate in an orientation program in a “sit down” meeting and then go out in the field with a veteran Arson Watch volunteer to learn the patrol routes.

They learn how to use the radio, and are briefed on log procedures and observation skills.

Once they are in the field, they wear safety vests with patches and markings

identifying them as official Sheriff’s volunteer team members. They also wear an official photo identification card issued by the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. They are further identified by magnetic signs affixed to the sides of their vehicles.

Some team members – including Emerson – devote up to 12 to 16 hours daily monitoring the radio frequencies and communicating information to other team members and to the local Emergency Operations Center.

“The big thing about the organization is deterrent, and it seems to be working,” Emerson said.

A retired caterer and restaurateur, Emerson is a native of Brooklyn, New York, and has been a resident of Southern California since 1953.

But he insisted that it is the volunteers – who are both male and female and represent all age groups, demographics and occupations – who are the story.

“They are the heroes, they’re out there, they’re doing it,” Emerson said.



Project Impact helps America change the way it handles disasters

America is changing the way it deals with disasters, according to the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

With the help of Project Impact: Building Disaster Resistant Communities, people across the nation are learning to take action to prevent damage before natural disasters strike, according to FEMA officials.

Partnerships and public education are two of Project Impact’s most important tools, officials said.

That’s why hundreds of community and business leaders, public officials, emergency managers and others around the country are working to prevent natural disasters from destroying their communities, according to FEMA. These communities are living testimonials to the fact that Project Impact works, officials said. Project Impact saves lives and money – for every dollar spent on disaster prevention, two or more dollars are saved in disaster recovery, based on FEMA statistics.

Project Impact, a program of FEMA, enables cities and towns to take on the responsibility of helping to prepare and protect themselves from future disasters. A community-based effort, Project Impact is enabling cities to work to save lives and reduce property damage.

For more information, contact the Project Impact hotline at 1-800-227-4731, learn more about Project Impact on FEMA’s web site at www.fema.gov, or call your local emergency manager.